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Statement submitted by Foundation for the Social Promotion of Culture, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2010/100.

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Statement

Gender equality and environmental sustainability in the development agenda of the Middle East

The experience of Foundation for the Social Promotion of Culture in the Middle East and North Africa has proved that gender equality and empowerment of women are central to any realistic approach to development in the region.

The Foundation believes that no progress in the achievement of the internationally agreed goals is possible unless women are empowered to fully participate in the economic life of their countries. To this end, a preliminary step must be taken, namely the full implementation of women's rights within the framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Beijing Declaration of 1995. Our work is guided by the premise that the promotion of gender equality is both a means for development and an end for the exercise of human rights by women and men.

The Foundation believes that legal constitutions and traditions should be reviewed in the light of women's right to equal opportunities and non-discrimination in both the private and public spheres. Promoting basic education, vocational training and employment of women is our organization's main contribution to the attainment of equality between men and women and to the empowerment of women in the development world.

For all these reasons, this statement is aligned with the theme of the annual ministerial review, implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women, to be held during the high-level segment of the substantive session of 2010 of the Economic and Social Council.

This statement addresses the full implementation of women's rights in Middle Eastern and North African societies through existing laws and actual practice in the Arab world, in order to further recognition of women's rights as a primary condition for achieving development.

In November 2009, the Foundation organized a seminar in Madrid on the theme "Guidelines for development in the most disadvantaged countries of the Euro-Mediterranean sphere: education, gender equality and rule of law", with 51 participants from the Middle East, Europe and North Africa (Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Israel, Latvia, Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, Czech Republic, Hungary and the Russian Federation), 37 representatives of non-governmental organizations, regional Governments, think tanks, and experts in cooperation for development.

One of the objectives of the seminar was to offer recommendations for the high-level segment of the Council's 2010 substantive session. Another was to furnish solutions and alternatives that might advance the Millennium Development Goals, especially education for all. Emphasis was placed on the relationship between education and employment, gender equality, rule of law and the extension of human rights to everyone within the framework of the conflicts that have been devastating Middle Eastern and North African countries for several generations.

The Foundation firmly believes that economic development is not attainable without women's full participation in economic life. The internationally agreed goals cannot be achieved unless women are recognized as key stakeholders.

The following recommendations were made:

(a) It is important to raise awareness in Middle Eastern and North African countries that the participation of women in economic and public life should be a precondition of every development action in the region;

(b) Within each culture, reforms must clearly separate the legislation of the different religious creeds from traditional practice, the latter being open to interpretation, change and progress;

(c) Women should be encouraged to actively participate in the decision-making process, peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution at all levels and phases, needs assessments, the formulation of policies, programmes and projects, budgeting, implementation monitoring, evaluations, reports and audits;

(d) Active participation in human rights-based approaches, the universal periodic review and all relevant reports on the region is also encouraged;

(e) To strengthen capacity-building and training, especially in human rights-based approaches, gender equality-based approaches, civic engagement in public policies, integrated approaches towards the issues of women and sustainable development and peace, as well as in terms of ethics, communications and networking skills;

(f) A review of the family codes of the different constitutions and legal traditions of the Middle Eastern and North African countries should be conducted. This review should take into account the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is the only norm that respects all creeds and cultural traditions;

(g) Local media could play a crucial role in raising the awareness of society about the new task Arab women loyal to their religion have to perform in order to fully participate in the development and progress of their nations;

(h) Last but not least, it would be convenient to create institutions to monitor respect for and the fulfilment of women's rights at the legislative, executive and domestic levels. Support by local and international Governments for these institutions will be necessary to provide them with the authority and the power to prosecute any kind of discriminatory action against women, as well as any violation of their rights.

The Foundation understands that, within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals, there are two cross-cutting issues in terms of the human development agenda: gender equality (Goal 3) and environmental sustainability (Goal 7). As we have already expressed our opinion and recommendations concerning Goal 3, we would also like to submit our recommendations regarding the achievement of Goal 7.

The Foundation sent these recommendations to the United Nations for the informal interactive hearings of the General Assembly with non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations and the private sector, held in June 2010. The recommendations were formulated at a workshop on rights and commitments regarding education and sustainable development in the Middle East, held in Madrid

with the participation of 23 non-governmental organizations from Africa, Asia and Europe.

The following recommendations were made:

To Governments and the international community

- Increase public awareness of the importance of sustainable development as an essential concept that supports both economic development and the conservation of nature.
- Reinforce environmental education as a basic element of official curricula, especially for new generations.
- Set up strict environmental legislation and guarantee the capacity of local authorities to implement it.
- Develop alternative energy sources and subsidize traditional sources, such as fuel, to avoid unwanted consequences such as the deforestation caused by the poorest, who are forced to obtain energy from wood and coal (owing to the high price of fuel).
- Encourage international institutions and donors to include the environment and the fight against climate change as essential elements of all projects.
- Set up tools as "best practices" to be followed by the various sustainable development partners, and develop environmental indicators for compulsory use in all programmes financed by donors and the United Nations.
- Work to achieve peace in the Middle East, ensuring that people have the right to rule their confiscated or occupied lands and control their water and natural resources within the borders defined by the international community.

To local authorities

- Construct, promote and implement a sustainable development strategy, with the participation of all local actors.
- Establish local institutions to promote sustainable development and to serve as a platform for interaction among the various actors, within a decentralized context, facilitating creativity and diversification.
- Develop town planning that respects nature and supports the poorest, ensuring that urban expansion complies with the law and respects the natural environment.
- Implement social and economic alternatives for people living in protected areas and buffer zones, such as community-based ecotourism.

To civil society and beneficiaries

- Develop and integrate environmental indicators and tools for every project.
- Establish networking among non-governmental organizations to exchange experiences and experts at the local, national, regional and global levels.
- Strengthen beneficiaries' capacities, to allow them to become the main actors in their own development; develop successful model projects that beneficiaries

can imitate; and make the beneficiaries understand that safeguarding the environment in the long run guarantees significant economic profits.

- Get involved in campaigns to raise awareness and advocacy to support public policy changes.

To the private sector

- Support initiatives and investment projects that will promote sustainable development in poor countries.
- Allocate resources to research and development concerning alternative energy sources and climate change.
- Promote agreements among the private sector, international institutions and experts specialized in sustainable development.
- Take advantage of the positive impact that pro-environmental efforts may produce in marketing terms and adopt ethical and responsible positions.